

CHAPTER 9

MEDIA AND INFORMATION CONTROL IN CHINA

“MEDIA CONTROL. *The Commission shall evaluate Chinese government efforts to influence and control perceptions of the United States and its policies through the internet, the Chinese print and electronic media, and Chinese internal propaganda.*” [P.L. 108–7, Division P, Sec. 2(c)(2)(I)]

KEY FINDINGS

- China’s economic reforms have not led to fundamental changes in its policy of controlling the free flow of information. China has successfully established systems of information control, which are both deep and widespread. The Chinese government’s crackdown on individuals who publish unacceptable content or violate information control rules is unevenly exercised, but nonetheless is part of a deliberate effort to establish comprehensive control. Selective but harsh enforcement has led to widespread self-censorship.
- The Internet is a growing focus of China’s information control efforts; many individuals in China and in the United States believe that it will lead to greater openness and the freer flow of information. However, the Chinese government is actively trying to control the Internet with a mixture of old tactics, such as high-profile punishment for vaguely defined crimes, and newer methods, such as establishing firewalls and tracing users.
- The Chinese government shapes popular perceptions of the United States and its policies through direct control over government-owned media outlets and by selectively censoring, and inducing self-censorship by, nongovernment media. This control has been used to create a consistent message in the Chinese media that is particularly critical of U.S. foreign policy and intentions in Asia. Through this propaganda and censorship, the government enhances the risks of misperception and miscalculation in the bilateral relationship and increases the potential for, and the difficulty of, managing crisis situations.
- The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) crisis demonstrated both the extent of China’s efforts to control the free flow of information and the limits of this exercise, given the Chinese population’s growing access to the Internet and other new forms of information distribution.
- SARS also demonstrated that China’s information control policies can have a direct effect on other countries. The failure of China to release complete and credible information about the health crisis hindered international efforts to combat the disease.

OVERVIEW

The Chinese government maintains significant controls on traditional information channels and is enhancing its resources to establish authority over new media. As a result, the government continues to possess a disconcerting capacity to influence the opinions and perceptions of its citizens.

The Commission's 2002 Report to Congress focused on the depiction of the United States and its policies in Chinese media and Chinese government statements.¹ The work of the Commission during this reporting cycle explored the capacity of the Chinese government to control the information available to its citizens. We evaluated the success of China's information control efforts and therefore China's ability to influence and control perceptions of the United States, examined whether China's policies in this regard have intensified or relaxed over the past year, and assessed the actions that the United States can pursue to reduce the effectiveness of China's information control policies.

The Commission held a hearing on June 5, 2003, to examine Chinese government efforts to control information flows and the media, particularly in the context of the SARS crisis, and to assess U.S. government and private sector efforts to bring reliable news to the Chinese public and to overcome government censorship. The hearing featured witnesses from the U.S. International Broadcasting Bureau, Voice of America (VOA), and Radio Free Asia (RFA) and outside experts on China's media control efforts, with a focus on those directed toward the Internet. The Commission also continued its work in translating articles from influential publications within China discussing Beijing's economic and security strategies and perceptions of the United States, which are published on our Web site.

The Commission's 2002 Report to Congress summarized the findings of a Commission-sponsored study of how China's official news media portrays the United States and its policies. The Commission's continuing work in translating important Chinese publications has reinforced the study's findings that the Chinese population is exposed to a uniform and consistent message that is critical of U.S. foreign policies and intentions in Asia.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

China's Media Control Efforts

The Chinese government actively seeks to control the information to which its citizens have access. The past year witnessed both bright and dark spots for the scope of media freedom. The SARS crisis demonstrated both the extensive efforts China's authorities undertake to control news of topics deemed sensitive as well as the limits of such censorship, given the Chinese population's growing access to the Internet and other new forms of media. Though Reporters Without Borders' 2003 report notes that some topics formerly prohibited from discussion in the Chinese media are now allowed, foreign and domestic journalists continue to confront government obstacles to reporting on a variety of subjects.² Moreover, because China allows hotels primarily used by foreign guests to

maintain access to foreign news sources, foreign visitors to China are unlikely to realize the extent of government censorship.

Chinese citizens who are unable to give voice to their concerns have resorted to desperate acts. For example, in March 2003, Fang Qinghui used a fake bomb to hold a local Reuters office hostage in order to have a public outlet for his concerns with corruption and unemployment.³

In one recent example of information control, Vice President Richard B. Cheney's April 2004 speech in Shanghai, broadcast live on Chinese television, was revised to remove mentions of political freedom and Taiwan when the Chinese government released a transcript.⁴ China's information control stretches beyond news to include art and history as well. For instance, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton's published memoir was selectively edited to remove portions speaking of human rights violations in China.⁵ Moreover, China's WTO accession agreement stipulates that China will allow only twenty foreign films per year to enter the market. Through the China Film Group, the Chinese government controls which films are selected for importation. The government can therefore choose which cinematic content it allows into the country.

The media control strategy of the Chinese government relies on making examples of a select few journalists or publications, which receive harsh punishments for vaguely defined crimes. As a result, remaining media outlets generally engage in self-censorship. Because the line between acceptable and unacceptable news is never well defined, those wishing to stay on the safe side seek to avoid any story that seems even questionable.⁶

The public's access to information can often play a role in public health issues. China adopted a new AIDS prevention strategy in December 2003, which contains efforts to increase public awareness and knowledge but notably does not include any broader intention to ease state controls on information. In light of this, the Commission recommended that Congress urge China to incorporate into its new AIDS strategy provisions for moving toward a free press and unobstructed public access to the Internet.⁷ China's recent history is not promising in this regard. China arrested prominent AIDS activist Wan Yanhai in September 2002 for posting AIDS-related information on the Internet. He was detained for more than a year, until the government had extracted a confession to the charge of exposing state secrets. Wan's organization remains banned.⁸

In fact, China continues to jail Internet activists for a variety of causes. As just a few examples, Du Daobin was imprisoned for months before being charged in February 2004 with "inciting subversion" by posting calls for democracy online.⁹ Four students were each given eight to ten years in prison in May 2003 for "subverting state secrets" by posting political essays on the Internet.¹⁰ Zhang Shengqi was arrested in November 2003 for posting reports of government repression of members of the Catholic Church. He was tried in secret in March 2004 for "divulging state secrets," along with Xu Yonghai and Liu Fenggang, who helped with the reports.¹¹

Expanding Media: The Internet and Mobile Phones

The government's treatment of traditional media in China has not fundamentally changed in recent years. The same methods are

used, and the news media respond in the same manner—at times challenging and at times acquiescing. A growing factor in the flow of information is the Internet, with Chinese users expanding rapidly. China's Internet users jumped from thirty-four million to fifty-nine million over the course of 2002, and at the close of 2003 the number was reportedly nearing eighty million.¹²

Because of the difficulty in controlling the Internet, Chinese users are able to access "a much broader range of news and opinion than they get from traditional media."¹³ Nonetheless, the Chinese government attempts to exert control over the Internet and its usage by employing both old and new tactics. As with traditional media, select individuals are punished as a warning to others.

At the same time, the government is working to develop a more systematic control over the Internet and has developed extensive human and technological resources for monitoring and censoring content on the Internet.¹⁴ The Chinese government is expanding its capability to trace Internet activity back to identifiable individual users. Additionally, while the opaque nature of China's security forces precludes an exact accounting, it has been estimated that China's Ministry of Public Security maintains a force of thirty thousand people solely tasked with tracking down Internet dissidents as part of the "Golden Shield" project.¹⁵

The government uses filtering and blocking technology to deny users inside China access to selective Web sites such as those of foreign news, human rights groups, and anything else deemed objectionable. In the past two years, this technology and the methods in which it is employed have grown more sophisticated¹⁶ and in some cases have involved technology developed by U.S. firms.¹⁷ China's censors sometimes attempt to block a Web site temporarily and sometimes attempt to maintain the block permanently. Individuals inside and outside of China are often able to circumvent the firewall that impedes access to such sites, if they take proactive measures and possess a basic competency in operating computer systems. The technologies employed by both sides result in a cat-and-mouse game where no firewall or circumvention is permanent, but Internet users who do not attempt to circumvent the firewall find their access to information further constricted after each iteration.

Cell phones are another rapidly expanding medium for the flow of information. China has more cell phones in use than the United States, with 277,000,000 in January 2004.¹⁸ Increasingly, cell phones are equipped with the capacity to send short text messages to a distribution list of other cell phones. The text messaging function of cell phones is used extensively in China, and thus represents a rapidly expanding method of interpersonal communication. Chinese cell phone users sent 15.6 billion text messages in January 2004 alone, an average of nearly two per day by each cell phone user.¹⁹ During the SARS epidemic, these text messages became an important and often uncensored source of information. However, the Chinese government is technically capable of monitoring such messages.²⁰ The development of the Chinese government's monitoring of text messages is an area deserving greater U.S. attention.

U.S. Anticensorship Efforts

With Radio Free Asia and Voice of America broadcasts, the United States has programs in place to provide alternative news and information to some areas of China. U.S. government Web sites, including RFA and VOA, also attempt to provide news to interested Chinese citizens. However, the Chinese government “regularly jam[s] all of the Voice of America and Radio Free Asia radio programs, in clear violation of accepted international rules and regulations followed by almost all other nations.”²¹ To jam radio broadcasts, China broadcasts its own transmissions on the same frequencies. Jamming is not always successful, depending on the location of the listener, the respective strength of the competing signals, and the number of frequencies on which RFA and VOA simultaneously broadcast the same signal. Despite the Chinese government’s extensive jamming efforts, RFA and VOA signals still reach a portion of their intended audience.

China also frequently denies visas to journalists of U.S. government-sponsored news organizations, despite the ease with which journalists of Chinese state publications are able to obtain U.S. visas. China maintains more than forty government journalists in the United States, while the VOA has two in China, and the RFA none.²²

The addition of the Internet to traditional media of information has reconfigured what was a fairly stable system of information repression by the Chinese government. U.S. government Web sites and some private firms are continually seeking to develop methods to circumvent China’s extensive Internet censorship. The Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) has a division devoted to anticensorship programs.²³ Private companies in the United States are also working on methods for allowing Internet users in China unfettered access to the Internet and are confident in their systems’ success. Some of these companies claim to already have the “anticensorship technology to do that, and ... just need additional funding.”²⁴

Support for Internet Anticensorship

For several years, the Global Internet Freedom Act has been under consideration by Congress. The House version of this bill was incorporated into the Foreign Relations Authorization Act as passed in 2003, but this legislation was not included in the version passed by the Senate. The bill would establish an Office of Global Internet Freedom tasked with combating Internet censorship worldwide, including through the development of anticensorship technologies. The office would also report annually to Congress on the status of foreign government control of the Internet. The Commission believes that such a coordinated effort by the U.S. government is needed to combat this practice in China and elsewhere.

In June 2003, the Commission recommended to Congress that it provide the BBG with funding targeted for China Internet anticensorship programs. The 2004 Omnibus Appropriations Act allocated \$1 million for the BBG to administer a pilot program for this effort. The resulting program cooperates with private sector actors to disrupt China’s blocking and tracking activities, allowing Chinese Internet users unrestricted Web access.

The Lessons of SARS

Background—The Nexus Between Public Health and Freedom of Information

SARS was officially acknowledged by China in February 2003, though cases are believed to have appeared in southern China in late 2002. The World Health Organization (WHO) classified more than eight thousand cases of the illness through July 31, 2003, with almost eight hundred deaths; the majority of the cases occurred in China.²⁵ The Chinese government initially reacted to SARS by suppressing all information regarding the epidemic. The outbreak provided an unusual opportunity to gain insight into China's information control goals and methods.

The Chinese government thoroughly suppressed coverage of the initial outbreak of SARS, closing publications such as *The 21st Century World Herald* and *China Newsweek* for releasing information on the outbreak. Also in late 2002, the government noticeably increased control over the topics and perspectives reported by news outlets during the transition period in the country's leadership. The government was compelled to dramatically reverse its policies on censoring information about SARS in April 2003 once facts about the true extent of the epidemic began spreading via the Internet and cell phone text messaging, despite the government's censorship efforts. Even after the April policy shift, however, individual reporters remained under a nebulous threat of jail time or job loss for covering disapproved subjects, and several of their colleagues continue to languish in prison for such offenses.

Were a similar health crisis to recur in China, the government may be less successful in initially containing the information. Under World Health Assembly mandates existing during SARS, China was not technically required to report the SARS outbreak to the WHO. Reporting is only mandatory in the case of a small number of named infectious diseases. The PRC Ministry of Health did send reports to WHO on February 11 regarding an outbreak of atypical pneumonia (as SARS is known in China) in Guangdong. Still, China's often inconsistent and reluctant response to WHO concerns certainly influenced the World Health Assembly's May 28 decision to adopt a resolution confirming WHO's authority to determine the severity of disease outbreaks through on-the-spot investigations, with or without the invitation of the host country.²⁶

Information Control During the SARS Crisis

One common view of China's information flows during the early stage of the SARS crisis is that "China's control of information was absolute."²⁷ News did eventually trickle out to international media, however, which led to international pressure on China to provide an open account of the outbreak. Additionally, cell phone text messages and more traditional forms of communication spread news and rumors, while international radio broadcasts and Web sites supplied information to those capable of access. It is more accurate, then, to say that the Chinese government attempted to control all information media during the early stages of the SARS crisis and met with substantial but neither complete nor enduring success.

The reversal of policy in managing the SARS crisis by President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao began in April 2003, suggesting to many observers that SARS would be an early and decisive test for these two new political leaders. Hu and Wen acted in the wake of international news stories reporting the accusations of a doctor from a Beijing military hospital that the minister of Health and the Beijing City government had wildly understated the number of SARS patients in the capital. Shortly afterwards, the Chinese government's policy responses to the SARS epidemic were in many ways reversed.

Hu and Wen led the nine-member Communist Party Politburo Standing Committee to approve the April 20 dismissal of Health Minister Zhang Wenkang and Beijing Mayor Meng Xuenong and encouraged quieter dismissals of dozens of local officials in affected provinces. They placed Vice Premier Wu Yi in charge of the Health ministry and the national fight against SARS. They extracted a rare public apology for the SARS cover-up from the Beijing party secretary, Liu Qi, who was allowed to remain in office, and ordered public health officials to cooperate with WHO investigators and fully report SARS cases within government channels.

Implications for Future Behavior of China's Government

SARS has now subsided, and the remaining question is whether the Chinese government has fundamentally changed its perspective on matters of information control, particularly regarding public health issues, or if it was merely forced into greater transparency by unusual circumstances and international concern. The Commission heard from U.S. officials and others who study China's censorship efforts who believe that the post-April openness of China's government was an aberration and that China would react to any new situation with a similar blocking of domestic reporting.²⁸

Those more attuned to China's ongoing economic reforms believe that the Chinese government has realized that its interest lies in protecting public health and avoiding any disruptions in international business flows. Because they see that the Communist Party's legitimacy is no longer based on ideological support but on economic growth, such observers expect that SARS has produced a fundamental change in China's information control strategy.²⁹

Given China's formal acceptance of open reporting on purely business issues in the late 1990s,³⁰ one other possibility is that China will loosen restraints on media reports covering public health issues without changing its broader stance on media control. In practice, China has returned to aggressive information control practices in the months following the SARS crisis, arresting Internet users with pronounced religious or political views.

Because China continues to selectively censor news and other information, it is capable of shaping the perceptions of its populace, particularly regarding the United States and its policies. This represents a subtle but pernicious form of propaganda. As compared to overt government statements, selective censorship leaves Chinese citizens with the belief that their opinions of the United States were independently and reasonably formed, making such misperceptions more difficult to correct.

The Effects of International Pressure

An important matter for U.S. policy is whether China's loosening of information control relating to SARS was a result of domestic or international pressures. Some witnesses at the Commission's hearing attributed the change to a policy of openness to outside economic and diplomatic pressures. For instance, Dr. Maochun Yu spoke of the Chinese government in saying that "unless you have a very strong external pressure on it, the government cannot itself reform."³¹ Others, however, argued that internal pressures are also very important as a result of the unwavering priority that the Chinese government gives to domestic political and social stability. The consensus held that U.S. and international pressure are able to impact significantly the information control behavior of China's government.

The SARS experience also has implications for international news outlets in China. Many Chinese turned to American government news sources such as the RFA or VOA for reliable information during the crisis, despite the efforts of the Chinese government to jam transmissions and block Web sites.³² Previously, the average Chinese citizen was likely to believe that international media are disreputable and generally given to unfair treatment of China. Because of the events surrounding SARS, many of these same individuals now see international news as more credible, becoming both avid consumers of its news on SARS and more willing sources of information for international journalists in China.³³

RECOMMENDATIONS

- On June 30, 2003, the Commission recommended that Congress direct the Broadcasting Board of Governors to target funds for efforts aimed at circumventing China's Internet firewall through the development of anticensorship technologies and methods. Congress approved such funding as part of the 2004 Omnibus Appropriations Act. The Commission recommends that Congress continue this program with enhanced resources, pending successful results for the current fiscal year.
- As recommended in the Commission's 2002 Report, the Commission reiterates that Congress should direct the Department of Commerce and other relevant agencies to conduct a review of export administration regulations to determine whether specific measures should be put in place to restrict the export of U.S. equipment, software, and technologies that permit the Chinese government to surveil its own people or censor free speech.
- The Commission recommends that Congress approve legislation to establish an Office of Global Internet Freedom within the executive branch, tasked with implementing a comprehensive global strategy to combat state-sponsored blocking of the Internet and persecution of users. The strategy should include the development of anticensorship technologies.
- The Commission recommends that Congress encourage the administration to press China to freely admit U.S. government-sponsored journalists, such as those representing the Voice of America and Radio Free Asia. China frequently denies visas for such journalists, despite the fact that China's state-sponsored journalists are freely admitted in the United States. Options

should be considered for linking Chinese cooperation to concrete consequences, including the possible use of U.S. visas for Chinese government journalists as leverage to gain admission of more U.S. government-supported journalists to China.

ENDNOTES

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